

Book Reviews

COMFORT WOMEN SPEAK: TESTIMONY BY SEX SLAVES OF THE JAPANESE MILITARY

Sangmie Choie Schellstede, Ed.
New York: Holmes and Meier
Publishers, Inc., 2000.

BY BRUCE WATSON

Comfort Women Speak presents the testimonies of 19 Korean “comfort women,” together with a critical forward by the president of the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues and a lengthy appendix of UN and US Justice Department documents on the so-called “comfort women issue.” By glossing “comfort women” as “sex slaves of the Japanese military,” the title points to at least two broader contexts, while foregrounding one of several internal battles of ideology which still confront the women of the book. The two contexts are the war of words stemming from the struggles surrounding the identification and acknowledgement of the “comfort women issue” and the Asian nationalist political tug-of-war of which the “comfort women issue” has become a pawn. In my review, I mean to affirm a particular importance of this book within the two contexts indicated in the book’s own title, while strongly urging for a reading of this book at least partly dislocated from the two political contexts I identify. Indeed, it is my conviction that if these individual voices are not read before the

wildernesses of history, Asian nationalist politics, and the “comfort women issue,” then the individual value of those testimonies may well be lost.

Each testimony is a narrative structured using the following order: name and origin; description of recruitment or abduction; story of their period of imprisonment, perpetual rape, and eventual return home; an account of the subsequent effects upon their lives; and finally, their thoughts on “The Japanese.” The similarities and differences in their accounts prove and illustrate the horrific nature of their sufferings while emphasizing the individuality of their experiences. Tones range from bewilderment, to shame, to anger and to depression, often in a single testimony. The brutally stark passages in each narrative, from brief recollections of their lives as school-girls to the graphic accounts of their imprisonment as military sex-slaves, enact the title’s implosion of “comfort women” into “sex slaves of the Japanese military.” And yet, testimonies such as that of Jin Kyung-paeng resist total demonization of the Japanese as they remember by name officers who were kind to them. And yet again, the effects of the trauma upon their bodies and minds (barrenness, severe pains and depression, disease and poverty)—direct effects of their treatment by the Japanese military—conclude their tales.

As a text produced by the “Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues, Inc.,” including a now-dated forward and editor’s note written from a South Korean perspective, and containing only the testimonies of several living Korean

“comfort women,” however, one problem presents itself to yet-uninformed readers who wish to contextualize *Comfort Women Speak*. The “comfort women issue” has been a political landmine, between Japan and South Korea; but it has also affected both countries’ relations with North Korea, China, and the Philippines. As described by Jodi Kim in her article on Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Women*,² the government of South Korea has claimed the “comfort women” as martyrs in the cause of their fiercely anti-colonial and problematically patriarchal nationalism. In its eagerness to treat the Korean comfort women as national martyrs, the exact nature of their sufferings, as well as their very survival of their wartime sexual slavery, remain topics with which the Korean government is reticent to engage. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the “comfort women issue” intersects Asian nationalist power-politics as China and the Koreans reintroduce it as a bargaining chip at every summit (including a recent one between South Korea and Japan over the North Korean nuclear crisis). Ironically, the ongoing power of the “comfort women issue” to generate and revive global antipathy and hatred towards Japan and Japanese people makes South Korea reluctant about the possibility of closure Japan claims it achieved with the recent settlement of \$42,000 paid in compensation to the remaining seven of ten Korean plaintiffs (three of whom settled in 1997).

Comfort Women Speak must not become lost in nationalist revisionist histories: the voices of its nineteen “comfort women” must not be lost

amidst the politics of nations or even "the comfort women issue."

¹"Comfort women" is a translation of the Japanese term *ju-gun-i-ahn-fu*, which was assigned by the Japanese military to the "voluntary corps" of women who were either abducted or (most often) recruited under false pretences. Hwang Keum-ju numbers among those who were "officially drafted" under the impression that they were to perform factory labour. Jin Kyung-paeng speaks as one of many women who were abducted (forcibly conscripted) by Japanese military personnel. Kim Young-shil accepted employment to "a good job" before finding herself in a "comfort station" near Manchuria.

²"Haunting History: Violence, Trauma, and the Politics of Memory in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Women*," *Critical Mass* 6:1, Fall 1999.

EMBODYING EQUITY: BODY IMAGE AS AN EQUITY ISSUE A MANUAL FOR EDUCATORS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Carla Rice and Vanessa Russell.
Toronto: Green Dragon Press, 2002.

BY MARGARET WELLS

It is only recently that teachers, curriculum writers, and service providers committed to equity issues have included a focus on body equity in their work. The recently published *Embodying Equity: Body Image as an Equity Issue A Manual for Educators and Service Providers* is an exceptionally valuable resource for those interested in this inclusion.

The resource consists of three sections. The first section provides back-

ground information about body image and equity issues and a description of the authors' work on the Embodying Equity Project at the Toronto Board of Education. The second section consists of the history of this project and directions for educators and service providers interested in running their own programs. The third section provides a detailed description of interactive activities that can be used as part of a curriculum unit, support group, camp or youth program.

The first section presents a very useful and accessible theoretical background to body equity issues, outlining how these intersect with other equity issues. This section begins with an insightful discussion of the movement from discussions of body image to the concept of body equity. As the authors point out, this involves a movement away from focusing on *changing* individual girls' attitudes about their bodies to focusing on *shifting* the social contexts and school cultures in which negative self-concepts develop and thrive. *Embodying Equity* explores how racism, sexism, discrimination against people with disabilities, homophobia, and class bias intersect with young people's experience of their bodies. Some practitioners may be tempted to skip directly to sections two and three in which specific directions of programs and activities are provided but they would be well advised to read through this first section because it provides an important context for working with young people in a way that takes the discussion of body image beyond the usual inclusion of size, shape, nutrition, dieting, and eating disorders.

The second section outlines programs that have been developed by the authors with students and staff. This includes support groups for students in elementary and secondary schools, retreats for young women, and staff training sessions. Detailed descriptions of support group and retreat programs in addition to general guidelines for operating such

programs will be very valuable to those who want to initiate such work. Alternative programming options that are less expensive than those outlined will allow people to adapt the suggestions to the current financial realities of education and social services.

The third section presents a wide range of interactive activities that can be used in specialized programs such as support groups and retreats or in the regular classroom. For each activity the suggested age, whether it is suitable for mixed or single gender, the risk level, the objective, the time required, step-by-step procedures, debriefing notes, and adaptations are provided. There are a range of activities including icebreakers, those allowing members of the group to meet each other, setting ground rules, examining media, attitudes to food, eating disorders, the impact of violence and harassment on body image, sexuality and the body, and developing action plans. These very clearly written, detailed directions make the resource user-friendly while maintaining the level of respect for practitioners that is present in the two previous sections.

Another valuable feature of *Embodying Equity* is the extensive annotated bibliography provided in Appendix One. This Appendix includes resources for teachers and service providers, as well as books for youth and children, and a range of magazines, films, and videos. One of the highlights of this section is the valuable annotation that would be very beneficial to people selecting resources to use in various settings. Appendix Two provides useful links to the Ontario curriculum for those teachers who want to incorporate this work into their own classrooms.

Embodying Equity is an exceptionally important and timely resource. It will enable equity educators and service providers to expand their notion of discrimination and exclusion and what constitutes excellent equity education. It will also support those interested in body image to